
Thomas Jefferson's Indian Policy 18 January 1803

President Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) secretly delivered this message to Congress advocating the establishment of trading houses among the American Indians. Jefferson desired to peacefully acquire the Mississippi frontier for trading and shipping purposes and to secure the nation's western border. While Jefferson stressed peaceful, friendly relations with Indians, the excerpt below demonstrated an assumption of cultural superiority, particularly evident in his strategy for acquiring American Indian lands. –Renata Fengler

Bibliography: Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Jefferson and the Indians: The Tragic Fate of the First Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), vii & 222.

[1] *Gentlemen of the Senate and of the House of Representatives:* As the continuance of the act for establishing trading houses with the Indian tribes will be under the consideration of the Legislature at its present session, I think it my duty to communicate the views which have guided me in the execution of that act, in order that you may decide on the policy of continuing it in the present or any other form, or discontinue it altogether if that shall, on the whole, seem most for the public good.

[2] The Indian tribes residing within the limits of the United States have for a considerable time been growing more and more uneasy at the constant diminution of the territory they occupy, although effected by their own voluntary sales, and the policy has long been gaining strength with them of refusing absolutely all further sale on any conditions A very few tribes only are not yet obstinately in these dispositions.

[3] In order peaceably to counteract this policy of theirs and to provide an extension of territory which the rapid increase of our numbers will call for, two measures are deemed expedient. First[:] To encourage them to abandon hunting, to apply to the raising [of] [live]stock, to agriculture, and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that less land and labor will maintain them in this better than in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life will then become useless, and they will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms and of increasing their domestic comforts.

[4] Secondly[:] To multiply trading houses among them, and place within their reach those things which will contribute more to their domestic comfort than the possession of extensive but uncultivated wilds. Experience and reflection will develop to them the wisdom of exchanging what they can spare and we want for what we can spare and they want. In leading them thus to agriculture, to manufactures, and civilization[,] in bringing together their and our sentiments, and in preparing them ultimately to participate in the benefits of our Government, I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good.

[5] In one quarter this is particularly interesting. The Legislature, reflecting on the late occurrences on the Mississippi,¹ must be sensible how desirable it is to possess a respectable breadth of country on that river, from our southern limit to the Illinois [River], at least, so that we may present as firm a front on that as on our eastern border. . . . Between the Ohio and Yazoo [Rivers] the country all belongs to the Chickasaws The portion of their country most important for us is exactly that which they do not inhabit. Their settlements are not on the Mississippi, but in the interior country. They have lately shown a desire to become agricultural, and this leads to the desire of buying implements and comforts. In the strengthening and gratifying of these wants I see the only prospect of planting on the Mississippi itself the means of its own safety.

Discussion Questions:

1. What was Thomas Jefferson's strategy to coerce the American Indians into selling their lands?
2. What sort of faith did Thomas Jefferson have in "domestic comforts" to acquire American Indian territory?
3. Where is the assumption of cultural superiority evident in this speech? What influence may it have had on the development of Thomas Jefferson's strategy?

SOURCE: *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, Vol. I, Ed. Jane D. Richardson (Bureau of National Literature, 1897), 340–42. Paragraph numbers have been added.

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¹ Americans in French New Orleans rebelled in 1802 after the French passed acts regarded as hostile to the United States. As a consequence, France sent forces to New Orleans to quell the rebellion and withdrew the United States' privilege of unloading goods for transit. Later, as a result of France's inability to defend and utilize the Louisiana Territory, Napoleon sold the land to the U.S. in April of 1803 for 15 million dollars.